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ON PAGE A-1

NEW YORK TIMES
9 August 1985

Nicaraguan Rebels Said to Open Major Drive Deep Inside Country

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Special to The New York Times

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, Aug. 8

— Substantial shipments of weapons and bullets in recent months have permitted as many as 10,000 Nicaraguan guerrillas to open a new anti-Government campaign deep inside Nicaragua, according to rebel officials, Western diplomats and Hondurans familiar with the rebels' operations.

The new guerrilla offensive, officials here say, appears to have caught the Nicaraguan Government by surprise.

Rebel units seem to have sidestepped Sandinista troops along the Honduran border to launch two major attacks in the last week in the distant departments of Estelí and Chontales, where they are reported to have killed as many as 95 Nicaraguan soldiers and militiamen in a series of ambushes.

The attacks represent the first return to major operations by the rebels in the last six months and appear to mark a shift in rebel fortunes after several months on the defensive. The heavy fighting has led the Nicaraguan Army to employ new Soviet-built MI-24 helicopter gunships for the first time in the war.

[The Reagan Administration acknowledged that officials on the National Security Council were involved in the operations of the Nicaraguan rebels. In providing the information, officials and President Reagan said the Administration had not violated United States laws. Page A4.]

Guerrilla officials interviewed here seemed more confident than at any other time in the last year, buoyed by the renewal of official American assistance as well as by growing Honduran tolerance for the guerrilla program and by a newly refurbished rebel air force.

Behind the Rebel Successes

"We are better off than ever at this moment," said Adolfo Calero, the political head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force guerrilla army. "The rest is up to us." He described the year ahead as "decisive" for the rebels.

Mr. Calero added in an interview that the renewed rebel attacks were the beginning of a military campaign that would stretch into the year ahead, financed by donations from private sponsors and by \$27 million in official "non-

military" assistance approved by the United States Congress. He said the Congressional aid had improved the rebels' credit rating and made it easier to get help from other sources.

Mr. Calero attributed the guerrillas' success in the last week both to new supplies and to new tactics. He said the rebels had begun to choose targets among isolated Sandinista outposts while setting ambushes to open fire on reinforcements sent by the Sandinistas.

If the Government defenders continue to use MI-24 gunships, regarded as highly effective against guerrilla forces, Mr. Calero said the rebels would retaliate by destroying Nicaragua's only oil refinery or another major target.

He added that the guerrillas would pay \$1 million to any Sandinista pilot willing to surrender one of the new attack helicopters to the rebels. The aircraft are of the same type thought to be in use by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

A key element in the guerrilla offensive appears to be newly acquired aircraft that will permit guerrilla units to remain inside Nicaragua and be supplied by air. If the rebels prove able to maintain an air supply network, they can avoid constantly returning to their border bases where they are vulnerable to Sandinista ambushes.

New Plane Is Expected

Mr. Calero said the rebels would soon receive a specialized "short landing and takeoff" aircraft that would allow them to fly in and out of small dirt strips in the jungle.

Mr. Calero has recently been joined by two other Nicaraguan opposition leaders, Arturo Cruz and Adolfo Robelo, in a new organization called the United Nicaraguan Opposition, known by its Spanish acronym as UNO. The three appear to have an uneasy alliance, with differing views on how the guerrilla war should be conducted and on whether it will be possible to negotiate with the Nicaraguan Government.

Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo were in Honduras this week to meet rebel military commanders and to discuss the use of the \$27 million in United States aid, according to rebel officials. The rebels say they believe that UNO will be the main conduit for the aid.

C.I.A. Help Expected

So far, however, there appear to be no firm plans on how the money will be

spent. Congress has stipulated that the help be humanitarian in nature, limited to nonlethal equipment for the rebels. One Western official suggested the money might also be spent on trucks or other transportation.

The rebels expect to receive intelligence and other help from the Central Intelligence Agency, according to Mr. Calero. Two sources aware of the insurgents' operations here said the C.I.A. would increase the number of agents it has in Honduras and closely supervise rebel operations.

Mr. Calero said he thought most of the money provided by the United States would be spent on uniforms, boots, backpacks, food and medicine. He added that some money would also be used to aid civilians inside Nicaragua.

Mr. Calero and other rebel leaders claim to have 17,000 men with weapons and as many as 5,000 more waiting for new arms. However, both a Western diplomat and a Honduran familiar with guerrilla operations said the rebels had only 10,000 to 12,000 men under arms, of which as many as 10,000 had now slipped into Nicaragua.

Both Western officials and Honduran political commentators noted that the Honduran Government seemed more disposed to allow the guerrillas to operate. Diplomatic pressure and economic aid from the United States appear to have helped to shore Honduran support for the war against Nicaragua.